



American Academy of Political and Social Science

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Source: *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 364, Patterns of Violence (Mar., 1966), pp. 37-49

Published by: Sage Publications, Inc. in association with the American Academy of Political and Social Science

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1034752>

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Controversies about the Mass Communication of Violence

By OTTO N. LARSEN

ABSTRACT: Few would dispute that American mass communication dispenses large doses of violence to audiences ever growing in size. Two related controversies stem from this fact. One concerns the question of effects and the other the problem of control. An inventory of relevant research is inconclusive about effects, partly because of varying conceptions of what constitutes evidence. A dynamic opinion process leads to control efforts. Critics play a vital part in defining discontent. A reciprocal relationship emerges between the public, the critic, and the media. American media respond to controversy and threat of censorship with systems of self-regulation. These grow out of public opinion and are sustained by it in a delicate balance dependent somewhat on developing knowledge of the effects of violence.

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ON December 12, 1963, the following brief letter appeared in the *New York Times*, sent by a man from Nazareth, Pennsylvania:

The shooting of President Kennedy was the normal method of dealing with an opponent as taught by countless television programs. This tragedy is one of the results of the corruption of people's minds and hearts by the violence of commercial television. It must not continue.

This terse statement, perhaps cogent to some because it offers an "explanation" for an otherwise unfathomable event, is typical of an indictment frequently directed toward the media of mass communication in American society, not only by letter-writers but by men of letters from many disciplines. It says, in effect, that violence is a dominant mode of mass media content. It adds that such content affects behavior. And it concludes that this calls for regulation and control. In the American system of mass communication, such indictments can have a significant social force of their own. They sensitize audience perception, generate public opinion, marshal pressures by special-interest groups, stimulate governmental investigation, and induce counteraction by the agencies of mass communication. They also raise questions of fact, problems of evidence, and matters of judgment concerning values and alternative social mechanisms for their implementation.

For these reasons, this paper attempts to assay the present state of knowledge concerning mass media violence in a context stressing the process of public indictment of the media for presenting such materials. Two concurrent but not perfectly correlated controversies will be explored: (1) the controversy over the effects of media violence and the evidence concerning such effects and (2) the controversy over the control of the portrayal of such violence.

The repeated portrayal of violence by the mass media could have many effects. One of the immediate results is the polarization of concern about such content. Thus, the body of relevant literature is mainly a compendium of lines of protest and defense, claims and counter-claims, charges and denials. To register this observation is to note more than a paucity of research. It means the presence of a public dialogue over effects and control repeated in broad form for each medium as it gains prominence and confronts decisions concerning the portrayal of violence. The pattern of this dialogue is, for the present at least, as important as the content of the competing claims. It may be said to signify the search that man is making for control mechanisms to contain the new scale that is introduced into personal and social life by the impressive technology of mass communication. In the process of examining this feature we shall naturally review conventional concerns with effects such as the alleged imprint that violent media content makes on personality, delinquency, and the like. The total effort may enhance our understanding of the functioning of mass communication in modern society generally. This, I believe, must ultimately come from continued efforts to penetrate the complexities of the reciprocal relationship between public opinion and mass communication.¹

CONTROVERSY OVER EFFECTS

I have recently had occasion to review the extensive literature on the general social effects of mass communication.² Rather than repeat a version of

¹ For an example of this kind of analysis, see Herbert J. Gans, "The Creator-Audience Relationship in the Mass Media: An Analysis of Movie-Making," *Mass Culture*, ed. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957), pp. 315-324.

² Otto N. Larsen, "Social Effects of Mass Communication," *Handbook of Modern Soci-*

that exercise, here directed toward the specific question of the effects of violence, I shall attempt an approach employed by television when it meshes interviews with two or more public figures to simulate direct debate between them; thus I shall borrow a mass media technique to draw together the diverse appraisals of the mass media. Bernard Berelson has provided a precedent for such a procedure.³ The manner of selection below does not warrant generalization about either the views of a given person or the discipline in which he happens to be working. The dialogue is designed merely to project significant views extant in the controversy.

The following presentation was initially developed by abstracting statements from a single publication of each of three men who have particular competence in the area: (1) Joseph T. Klapper, a Ph.D. in sociology, currently directing research for the Columbia Broadcasting System,⁴ (2) Frederic Wertham, a New York psychiatrist,⁵ and (3) Dallas W. Smythe, a Ph.D. in economics, formerly Chief Economist for the Federal Communications Commission and now a professor of economics.⁶ Material from their publications is connected in dialogue form, with adaptations and additions to meet the requirements of this style. While the authors cite each other in their work, they by no means address each other in

the manner imagined below. Accordingly, this presentation is not a stipulation of fact according to their choosing but a composite of perceived truth for our purposes. For further convenience, the dialogue will be presented as a conversation between a media-sociologist, a media-psychiatrist, and a media-economist.

Media-sociologist: The fear regarding the effects of mass media content is more frequently expressed by parents, educators, and freelance writers than by disciplined communication researchers. True, there can be no doubt that violence is frequently depicted in the media. However, the statistics of violence shine conspicuously in a standardless void. Their increasing size may attest a trend in media content, but it does not indicate that any particular effects are therefore more or less likely to occur. Actually, nothing is known about the relationship, if any, between the incidence of violence in media programs and the likelihood that it will produce effects.

Media-psychiatrist: If, as you say, there is nothing known, we are scientifically in a bad way indeed. As I see it, we are confronted in the mass media with a display to children of brutality, sadism, and violence such as the world has never seen. At the same time there is such a rise of violence among our youth that no peace corps abroad can make up for the violence corps at home. Social scientists say that the test of science is prediction, and I predicted fifteen years ago that more and more brutal violence would be committed by younger and younger age groups. Now it is a matter of common knowledge.

Media-economist: Can it be proved that particular television programs or comic books are prime causes of delinquency? The problem children you have studied appear to be media addicts who are affected by the cumulation of

ology, ed. Robert E. L. Faris (Chicago: Rand, McNally, 1964), pp. 348-381.

³ Bernard Berelson, "The Great Debate on Cultural Democracy," *Studies in Public Communication*, No. 3 (Summer 1961), pp. 3-14.

⁴ Joseph T. Klapper, *The Effects of Mass Communication* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1960), pp. 135-165.

⁵ Frederic Wertham, "The Scientific Study of Mass Media Effects," *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 119 (October 1962), pp. 306-311.

⁶ Dallas W. Smythe, "Dimensions of Violence," *Audio-Visual Communications Review*, 3 (Winter 1955), pp. 58-63.

media violence. However, your book also seems to indicate that delinquency arises from a complex of factors, including the economic and social conditions of the environment.

Media-psychiatrist: It makes no difference in our stage of knowledge if a cause is not "immediate" but remote, not "primary" but secondary, not "direct" but indirect. What is important is that without this contributing factor the harmful effect would not have taken place, or at least not in that form. In mental life, all contributory factors have to be regarded as causal. My clinical studies of over two hundred unselected cases lead to the conclusion that children are getting more and more tele-directed. As a result there is a loss of emotional spontaneity and a distortion of natural attitudes in the direction of cynicism, greed, hostility, callousness, and insensitivity expressed in overt acts, in fantasy, and in dreams.

Media-sociologist: You mention only a few of the specific fears about media effects; some of those who fear the effects of violence seem unsure of what specific consequences might follow, only that they are undesirable. Others fear that such material elicits direct, imitative behavior—that an otherwise normal child may commit crimes after seeing them on television.

Media-psychiatrist: I have seen it in my clinical studies.

Media-sociologist: This presupposes that the media have a kind of direct, "hypodermic needle" effect. Research would not support this. Others say that media depictions of violence constitute a school for delinquency, teaching methods of crime, or that the media will have a kind of trigger effect which operates in situations of reduced moral resistance. Finally, there are even those who believe that media violence has beneficial effects by providing a kind of catharsis of antisocial drives.

Media-economist: To my knowledge there is no research evidence to support any of these charges, but my hunch would be that no child, exposed to mass media content in large doses, is unaffected by it. Certainly, from our content analysis of television programs, one can conclude that, except for doctors and the unemployed, characters are highly stereotyped, with some of the stereotypes being presumptively dangerous if taken as models for viewer behavior.

Media-psychiatrist: I might point out here that although your empirical research may not prove that there are effects, neither does it prove that there are not. At the present time, a number of books are appearing which minimize or deny media effects and confuse the issue. So the home, which in pre-electronic times afforded the child protection, is now invaded on two fronts: by bad television programs which influence the children and by slanted books about them which influence the parents.

Media-sociologist: Let us discuss one of these books. It seems to me that *Television and the Child* by Hilde Himmelweit and associates⁷ gives evidence on some of the charges we have been talking about. They studied 1,854 children in England divided into viewers and nonviewers and matched by age, sex, intelligence, social background, and other factors to determine whether observed differences were the product of viewing or were pre-existing.

Media-psychiatrist: The children were not examined. They just filled out formal questionnaires. Furthermore, when this report appeared it was already out-of-date; the British screen had not yet become littered with dead cowboys. Moreover, it does not apply, then or now, to American children who are

⁷ Hilde T. Himmelweit, A. N. Oppenheim, and Pamela Vince, *Television and the Child* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958).

exposed to much more and worse screen mayhem. It is also a fallacy to think that findings are not scientific unless they can be expressed in a graph and in very large numbers. There is no substitute for a thorough clinical psychiatric examination of actual cases.

Media-economist: You are saying that you don't believe that they can generalize their findings from a large sample to the individual, but that you can generalize your results working with an individual to the larger group.

Media-sociologist: Despite your objections, let's look at some of their findings; we may even find some support for your conclusions. First, they do find that some content may be frightening, on radio as well as television.

Media-economist: We must not forget the violence in documentaries, on news broadcasts, and perhaps even in sports programs.

Media-sociologist: True. However, Himmelweit did find that real violence is less likely to frighten children than is violence in fictional programs, but, on the other hand, real violence is more widely disliked. Virtually nothing is known regarding the duration of such fright or the ways, if any, in which it may affect children's concepts or behavior. The alleged effect on disturbed sleep, nightmares, and the like would appear to be evanescent.

Media-psychiatrist: Case histories in psychiatric literature. . . .

Media-sociologist: Let me complete the summary. Himmelweit did find that the degree to which children are disturbed appears to be related to the means by which injury is done. Shooting is not disturbing, but a knife attack may be. Violence which follows a conventional pattern, the outcome of which is predictable, such as is found in Westerns, apparently disturbs few children.

Media-psychiatrist: That pronouncement indicates the difference between the adult's offhand acceptance of what he *thinks* the child gets from television and the actual reaction of the child. It is a typical adult response, and is not how children see it. For example, the report states that if the victim who has been shot clutches at this stomach, that merely means to the child that he has been shot from the front! Many children have told me what it means to *them*: that the man is shot in the stomach because that is one of the places where it hurts most.

Media-sociologist: However, the study shows that children are apparently more sensitive to acts of verbal aggression than to actual physical violence. Sound effects are about equally as frightening as visual effects, and the child is more likely to be frightened viewing alone or with children his own age than when viewing with adults present. They also found that there was no more aggressive, maladjusted, or delinquent behavior among viewers than among nonviewers.

Media-psychiatrist: As far as negative effects are concerned, this report centers on what is frightening or disturbing to the child. From a mental health point of view, these are neither the only nor even the most important bad effects. Furthermore, the study relies on statistics based on individual answers to questions, without considering the whole child.

Media-sociologist: In general, while the media do not appear to be a crucial or primary determinant of behavioral tendencies, there are indications that violent fare may serve special functions for those who are already socially maladjusted.

Media-psychiatrist: The normal child is alleged to be invulnerable, the abnormal child vulnerable. It is not only

the abnormal child, however, who can learn—and be seduced. Normal children are not inaccessible.

Media-economist: Certainly there have been studies, by Albert Bandura and others, which have shown that children in laboratory experiments exhibited greater aggression and inflicted greater punishments on others after seeing a film with violent content than control subjects who had seen a neutral film. Does this not cast doubt on the catharsis principle?

Media-sociologist: Perhaps. And while we all follow with interest the newer laboratory studies, we will also continue to be curious about what happens when laboratory studies are translated into real-life situations where influences such as social norms and parental sanctions operate. Certainly we need to know more about the duration of any immediate effects that have been observed.

Media-economist: I wonder if television crime programs and crime comics are being made scapegoats?

Media-psychiatrist: How do you mean?

Media-economist: Any review of the history of technological innovation would show that where such innovations bear on the public, they tend to become blamed for current social ills. Could it be that we are really fighting the threat to individual integrity of a technologically oriented society? Our mass media have the aspect of a one-way conveyor belt. In work, the individual has become a narrow specialist. In leisure time with the mass media he seems to become more a passive, receiving automaton. If the adult senses that political apathy and a feeling of anomie are somehow related to these threats to his autonomy, small wonder that he protests that passively sitting and watching television crime programs is not good for his child. Couldn't mass

media violence also be a symptom of our general social life and not a cause?

Media-psychiatrist: Something may very well be a symptom and at the same time a cause. This is no argument. Socially, mass media violence is a symptom; individually, it may be an operative cause.

Media-economist: Possibly our concern over television and children would lead to more significant results if it were focused on the effects which are precluded because certain kinds of cultural experience, being outside the orbit of cultural industry, are not being made available to children.

Media-sociologist: Himmelweit points out that since violence programs take up a disproportionate amount of viewing time, this prevents the showing of more varied fare that could offer children a broader view of life.

Media-economist: What do we actually find on television? Do we find a world where men and women enjoy self-respect and freely accord it to others? Or does it present a world which is peopled with characters so stereotyped as to lack diversity and portrayed merely as all good or all bad? We don't know, but perhaps the intuition of sensitive laymen—such as found in Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) groups—may not be too far wide of the mark.

Media-psychiatrist: Hear! Hear!

Media-sociologist: I rest my case with need for further research. Thus far, there is little evidence that media violence is a prime mover of behavior. The content seems rather to reinforce or implement existing and otherwise induced behavioral tendencies. For the well-adjusted, it appears to be innocuous or even to be selectively perceived as socially useful. For the maladjusted, particularly the aggressively inclined and the frustrated, it appears to serve, at the very least, as a stimulant to escapist and possibly aggressive fantasy

and probably to serve other functions as yet unidentified. I would also add that further information on the role of mass communication in the development of delinquency is more likely to come from the study of delinquency than from the study of mass communication.

Media-psychiatrist: We are asked to eradicate from our thinking the stereotype of the Big Media and the Little Me. This is far from being a wrong stereotype; the contrast between the immensely powerful mass media and the individual family and child is one of the most essential facts of our present existence.

The dialogue could go on, but *its inconclusiveness is enough to indicate contrasting estimates of what is known, what needs to be known, and what constitutes knowing* about the effects of mass media violence. In the face of such circumstances when confronted with the problem of selecting from alternative control mechanisms, it is prudent to subscribe to Charles Winick's conclusion that

social scientists have generally felt that their knowledge of the effects of media is not substantial enough to permit recommendation of what ought to be proscribed, even assuming the existence of a censorship apparatus.⁸

Research is a continuous activity, and the above conclusion will not be taken as the final word in the research-policy relationship. Some additional cautions should be posted here, however. More recent and more rigorous research than that referred to above is in the direction indicating that exposure to mass media violence can directly induce aggressive behavior in both children

and adults.⁹ But even if future efforts substantiated such research, further work would be required to establish the social implications of such findings. The debate so far has tacitly assumed that aggressiveness of the individual is socially dysfunctional. This may be, but do we know that it is? Researchers need to consider this question.

Furthermore, in the history of each medium of mass communication, there is little evidence to support the logic that if the controversy over effects could be resolved, the problem over control might readily be solved. Indeed, folk-experience does not wait passively for technical knowledge to emerge to solve problems, but proceeds under a dynamic of its own to search for solutions. Accordingly, we suggest that in developing a strategy of research, students of effects would be well advised to broaden their conception to take into account the evolution of the transaction between media and audience. Certainly, effects do not flow only in one direction. The flow back to the media may be said to begin when someone recognizes a situation to be problematic. It comes full circle when there is an adjustment in the form of some organized regulation. We turn to a consideration of some conditions and mechanisms through which opinion is generated, expressed, and impressed in the media-audience relationship.

CONTROVERSY AND CONTROL

Paradoxically, controversy over mass communication emerges from a point of consensus bearing on the potential im-

⁸ Charles Winick, "Censor and Sensibility: A Content Analysis of the Television Censor's Comments," *Journal of Broadcasting*, 5 (Spring 1961), p. 119.

⁹ See, for example, Leonard D. Eron, "Relationship of TV Viewing Habits and Aggressive Behavior in Children," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 67 (August 1963), pp. 193-196; Leonard Berkowitz, "The Effects of Observing Violence," *Scientific American*, 210 (February 1964), pp. 35-41.

part of the media: more and more people are spending more and more time in exposure to media content; this is incontrovertible. With the development and diffusion of ever more efficient technologies for the transmission of images, the world-wide opportunities for such exposure continue to accelerate. The United States continues to set the pace by creating and extending a communication system unparalleled in its magnitude.¹⁰

This fact of ubiquity sows the seeds of controversy. Anything so massive that compels so much attention inevitably calls forth some critical reflection on grounds of sheer quantity alone. Such reflection is quickly nourished into specific complaint when considerations of quality are coupled to the assumed potency of size. It is not the machine alone (for who has not marveled at some aspect of this complex mechanical, electrical, and organizational mix?), it is the manner in which it is operated that calls forth the critical response. A persistent feature of that operation is the portrayal of violence. It must be acknowledged that this is but a single factor contributing to dissatisfaction with the state of the communication system. Dan Lacy paints the broader picture by noting that

the banality and emptiness of most broadcasts and films, the "slickness" of magazines, the political bias of newspapers and news magazines, the cultural and political conformity of the mass media, sex and violence in books, films and broadcasts, illiteracy and superficiality in cultural life—all are the subject of thoughtful and continuous complaint.¹¹

In the American systems of mass communication, complaints, whether

thoughtful or not, can be the beginning of a communicative process that may ultimately register an impact on the decision as to what content the media will offer their audience. Guided as they are by economic considerations intimately tied to audience size, the media can be acutely sensitive to audience feedback. If complaint generates controversy and if controversy generates consensus, then the probability of influence and the possibility of change is maximized. In some instances, complaint can also be effective apart from a real consensus because the media are prone to overgeneralize certain registered reactions. For these reasons it is important to attempt to identify the components and functioning of this interactive system in which complaint has such a significant potential.

Media-audience-critic. A first element to note is that complaint, as a forerunner to controversy, is a definition of a problem that may generate discontent, but does not uniformly arise from discontent. Since the media cater to a mass audience and attempt to satisfy the largest possible number of persons, it is not surprising that complaint does not generally emanate as a grass-roots response. It is, rather, the reaction of a select, articulate minority. Bernard Berelson's characterization of the audience appraisal of television clearly represents what has been the case for each medium at the point where it begins to receive critical scrutiny.¹²

For about fifteen years now, television has been at, or close to, the center of attention in America. The people have been watching television, and the critics, commentators, and educators have been watching the people watching television. On the whole, *the one has liked what it saw; the other, not* [italics mine].

¹⁰ For details, see Dan Lacy, *Freedom and Communications* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), p. 62.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² In Gary A. Steiner, *The People Look at Television* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), p. vii.

At this point in the process, it might appear that the media, invoking their democratic calculus, would reveal little concern over the complaints of a critical minority in the face of support and approval from the vast majority of their audience. This, as we shall see, is too simple and too static a conception of the media-audience-critic relationship.

While the critics may not like what they see, they are not all of one cut, one mind, or one disposition to act. Some engage mainly in intellectual analysis of factors contributing to the decline of high culture, with resulting impressive symposia on mass media and mass society.¹³ Media managers are not insensitive to such efforts but have ready defenses for deflecting the argument at this level. The words of Dr. Frank Stanton, president of the Columbia Broadcasting System, present a case in point:¹⁴

Some sort of hostility on the part of the intellectuals toward the mass media is inevitable, because the intellectuals are a minority, one not really reconciled to some basic features of democratic life. They are an articulate and cantankerous minority, not readily given to examining evidence about the mass media and then arriving at conclusions, but more likely to come to conclusions and then select the evidence to support them. But they are an invaluable minority. . . . They probe around frontiers in their splendid sparsity, looking around occasionally to see where—how far behind—the rest of us are. We are never going to catch up, but at least we shall always have somewhere to go.

Another set of critics is disposed to translate abstract conviction into concrete action in the court of public opinion. Whether such initiators of complaint go on to become the molders of a controversy whose pressure the

media cannot ignore or deflect is contingent upon a number of factors. It will depend, first, on the nature of the media content under question, its salience to a broader public, and the relevant traditions, values, and norms concerning public display of such content.

Value clusters. In American society, in sharp contrast to the situation in many other countries, a critic will not automatically muster support for his complaints about the portrayal of violence in the mass media. A number of value clusters are relevant here. One is the traditional aversion that Americans hold toward censorship and restriction of free expression. Another is a deep cultural commitment to violence extending back to frontier days.¹⁵ Throughout our history a great deal of violent behavior has been positively sanctioned. Many occupations allow for and even require the use of violence.¹⁶ Beyond that, the indicators of an abiding public fascination with violence are all around us, as witnessed in the popularity of certain athletic events, such as professional football (sometimes referred to as "Mayhem on a Sunday Afternoon"), the booming Christmas sales of toy weapons ranging from gun-shaped teething rings to simulated atom bombs, and the continued attraction of both real and fictional accounts of war and crime.¹⁷ While the mass media

¹⁵ A typology for the analysis of violence as part of the American social and cultural structure is presented by Walter M. Gerson, "Violence: An American Value Theme?", *Violence and the Mass Media*, ed. Otto N. Larsen (New York: Harper & Row, forthcoming, 1967).

¹⁶ For an examination of some complexities concerning the obvious example see, William A. Westley, "Violence and the Police," *American Journal of Sociology*, 59 (July 1953), pp. 34-41.

¹⁷ For further examples, see Roy G. Francis, "Kapow!!: An Argument and a Forecast," *Social Problems*, 12 (Winter 1965), pp. 328-335.

¹³ See, for example, Norman Jacobs (ed.), *Culture for the Millions?* (Princeton, N.J.: D. Van Nostrand, 1961).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

may whet the appetite for such materials, any would-be critic must ultimately come to recognize that such an appetite is rooted much deeper in American experience, if not in human nature. At the same time it may be acknowledged that the presence of other value clusters (for example, concern for the welfare of children) provides a counterbalancing context receptive to criticisms directed toward mass media violence.

Opinion leadership. Thus, the cultural context in which the media content is received sets broad limits affecting the possibility of controversy and even the shape in which it may be formed and expressed. Equally important, however, is the interpenetration and operation of the persistent action-oriented critic whose power as an opinion leader becomes manifest in terms of (1) his professional status, (2) his access to platform or medium to amplify and spread his argument, (3) his linkage to sources of organized response from voluntary associations, and (4) the ability of such organizations to mobilize community concern, political investigation, the threat of new legal sanctions, and the possibility of some form of boycott of the media by a sizable portion of the audience.

In patterned sequence, these elements have, at one time or another, emerged to direct pressures against most forms of American mass communication to influence the manner in which they portray violence and other sensitive material. A feedback chain is forged as critics speak, opinions are amplified through various media, local groups pick up the argument, voluntary associations mount crusades, legions of decency appear, clean-up campaigns are organized, distributors of media content are challenged, petitions are circulated, politicians are alerted, hearings are held, authorities testify, resolutions are passed, and government intervention is

threatened. The intricate elaboration of criticism into effective public opinion, through a maze of protest, publicity, community action, legislative investigation and, finally, media reaction has been analyzed in varying degree with respect to the motion pictures,¹⁸ the comic books,¹⁹ and the broadcast media.²⁰ In each case, the feature that finally appears to compel the media to react in some visible and tangible way is the threat of restrictive laws or other intervention by governmental agencies.

Self-regulation. In broad terms, the response of these media to the increase of public pressure has followed a similar form: after a defense of their performance in the name of a "free press," and after denouncing the evils of censorship, they take on the responsibilities of censors themselves as each develops an internal system of self-regulation. Self-regulation means that a communications industry taxes itself to establish an organization to police itself. A code of good conduct is formulated which prohibits the presentation of certain kinds of materials;²¹ media content is reviewed and edited in conformity to the code before it is released; some sort of "seal of approval" is appended to symbolize

¹⁸ Ruth A. Inglis, *Freedom of the Movies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947).

¹⁹ John E. Twomey, "The Citizens' Committee and Comic-Book Control: A Study of Extragovernmental Restraint," *Law and Contemporary Problems*, 20 (Autumn 1955), pp. 621-629.

²⁰ John E. Coons (ed.), *Freedom and Responsibility in Broadcasting* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1961).

²¹ Codes for the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the Motion Picture Association of America, and the National Association of Broadcasters are reproduced in Wilbur Schramm (ed.), *Mass Communications* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1960). The code employed by the Comics Magazine Association of America may be found in George A. Lundberg, et al., *Sociology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 239.

this conformity; and other efforts of a public relations sort are made to head off the kind of criticism that gave rise to self-regulation in the first place. As a result, for a time at least, controversy around a particular complaint, such as the excess use of violence, may tend to subside, and a wavering equilibrium emerges between the force of public opinion and the powers of media policy, as each side of the interaction adapts itself to the other.

The above is almost precisely what happened in the case of comic books, with marked consequences for those products with a heavy violence emphasis of the "crime" and "horror" variety. This medium developed in its present form in the 1930's and grew until the early 1950's when 600 titles of all varieties filled the newsstands and sales reached over 60 million copies per month. At the peak of the dynamic opinion process outlined above, industry self-regulation was instituted in 1954. The comics code forbids the use of the words "horror" or "terror" on the cover and also places restrictions on use of the word "crime." With reference to other materials bearing on the portrayal of violence, the code, consisting of 41 specific regulations and a "catch all" provision, includes the following restrictions:

No comics shall explicitly present the unique details and methods of a crime.

Scenes of excessive violence shall be prohibited. Scenes of brutal torture, excessive and unnecessary knife and gun play, physical agony, gory and gruesome crime shall be eliminated.

No unique or unusual methods of concealing weapons shall be shown.

Scenes dealing with, or instruments associated with walking dead, torture, vampires and vampirism, ghouls, cannibalism and werewolfism are prohibited.

Advertising for the sale of knives, or realistic gun facsimiles is prohibited.

Appraisal. After a decade of self-regulation, the Comic Magazine Association issued a booklet reviewing its efforts.²² While the booklet is not an unbiased appraisal, it argues:

Besides establishing and enforcing standards more stringent than any restrictive legislation legally enforceable under the constitutional guarantees of a free press, voluntary self-regulation is effective because it brings about willing cooperation rather than the reluctant, often inadequate or belated "compliance" given to coercive laws.²³

Then, of special relevance to the framework of the present analysis, it presents an impressive array of testimonials and commendations from church, civic, veteran, parent-teacher, business, and other organizations which leads to the conclusion that

their comments offer substantial proof that the comic magazine industry's program of self-regulation has well accomplished its purpose of providing an effective and practical means of eliminating undesirable material from comic magazines.²⁴

The battle over the content of the comic book has been a significant part of the war against violence in mass communication. It has brought to the arena of discourse, as the turmoil over the motion pictures did earlier and as current concern over television is doing, vital experience with a delicate mechanism of social control. While self-regulation appears to disarm many combatants, new issues around censorship call forth new disputes,²⁵ and not all of the former critics are satisfied with self-

²² John L. Goldwater, *Americana in Four Colors* (New York: Comic Magazine Association of America, 1964).

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

²⁵ For example, John E. Twomey, "New Forms of Social Control over Mass Media Content," *Studies in Public Communication*, No. 1 (Summer 1957), pp. 38-44.

regulation as a solution to old problems. Numbered among the latter is the single most influential critic in the long controversy over comics and an imposing figure in the continuing struggle to control violence wherever portrayed in the media—Dr. Frederic Wertham, the aforementioned New York psychiatrist.

Wertham has never relented in his long campaign against the comic books.²⁶ His skepticism about self-regulation is indicated by a recent statement observing that “at present, with the threat of legislation receding, the number of crime comic books is again increasing by the millions.”²⁷ If for no other reason, Wertham continues to draw sympathetic attention because his basic concern is with children. As we have seen, he asserts that from the mass media they learn that violence is a constructive, socially approved form of settling difficulties. Accordingly children should be protected, and protected not by self-regulation but by law. He insists that social control for the protection of children has nothing to do with censorship for adults, although he recognizes that to make regulations applying only to children is not easy. He then reiterates his long-standing plea for a welfare law that would control crime comic books directly packaged, displayed, advertised and sold to children under fifteen years of age, noting that similar laws concerning the sale and consumption of liquor are never termed an infringement on civil liberties or a restraint of trade.

When Wertham turns to a considera-

²⁶ A prolific writer, Wertham has presented his case in many magazines and journals (and before many congressional committees), but most importantly in his book, Frederic Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rinehart, 1953).

²⁷ Frederic Wertham, “Mass Media and Sex Deviation,” *Sexual Behavior and the Law*, ed. Ralph Slovenko (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C Thomas, 1965).

tion of violence on television, his enthusiasm for legal control is tempered by the fact that many adults look at television during children’s viewing time, and many children watch it outside of this period. Furthermore, he observes that no control law could be limited to television alone but would have to include the movies which are so often shown on television. Despite these difficulties, Wertham recommends two courses of action: (1) the formulation in legal terms of the permissible boundaries of the kind, quality and quantity of sadism, violence, and brutality of television shows, along with strict licensing and powers of license revocation in terms of these standards, and (2) the improvement and translation of the relevant part of the industry’s code into legal terms to stimulate the industry to strengthen facilities for content analysis and to grant them sufficient powers for enforcement. He concludes that “the best efforts of the best people in television would be aided by such a law, and children would reap a special benefit.”²⁸ And he closes with this observation: “Does the modern state need protection against the mass media? This is an issue with no easy answers. It will be debated for a long time.”²⁹

Wertham, a man whose critical capacities have perhaps contributed most to the controversy feeding the forces that led to self-regulation, now (in 1965) takes a somewhat equivocal stance with respect to this mechanism. He clearly does not trust it in the hands of the comic-book publishers. For television, on the other hand, he would formalize its “best” elements and buttress them with the sanctions of law. As he notes, the debate over control will go on.

Charles Winick, in a pioneering study

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 848.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

of the activities of a program-screening department operating in television self-regulation, has sharply specified a prime requisite for the ventilation of the issue:

A close-up examination of how self-regulation of media actually takes place might help to cast light on those shibboleths or institutions of our society whose lengthened shadows are reflected in the censor's changes and could clarify the kind of use which is being made of the censor's power. Rather than debate censorship in the abstract, an examination of how it actually

works might serve to make more real the concept of censorship.³⁰

Thus, concern over mass media violence moves from controversy to control and back again to controversy. Whether such cycles ultimately evolve into more satisfactory policy adjustments will depend on a better knowledge of effects, a clearer conception of alternative mechanisms of control, and a sharper understanding of how the two are linked.

³⁰ Winick, *op. cit.*